

# Nation & World

## Cutting college costs aim of wide-ranging bill

Provisions include affordable textbooks, more protections against loans, making grants year-round

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Congress wants to blow the whistle on colleges that raise tuition sharply, while helping students pay less for textbooks and making Pell grants available year-round — part of a wide-ranging bill designed to address concerns about rising college costs.

Under the legislation, students could get earlier warning about which textbooks they'll need for class, giving them more time to shop around, while professors would see more information on prices when they're choosing which books to assign.

Colleges that impose severe tuition increases, meanwhile, could be shamed on a government watch list.

The sprawling Higher Education Act that the House is considering Thursday contains mostly small and mid-size steps aimed at addressing college costs. Lawmakers refrained from bigger steps like price controls, instead hoping more transparency will lead to lower prices.

Will it do much good? Depends on whom you ask.

Experts say students probably will benefit more overall from the steps Congress took last year — cutting interest rates on student loans, raising Pell Grants for low-income students and redirecting billions of dollars from lender subsidies to programs targeting students more directly.

Still, when lawmakers finally got around to reauthorizing the main federal law overseeing higher education — it was first due for renewal in 2003 — they seemed determined to go beyond simply boosting student aid dollars. Among a range of measures affecting everything from training teachers and nurses to fire safety, the bill includes rewards for colleges that keep prices down.

House and Senate negotiators agreed on a final compromise Wednesday, with final votes from both chambers expected within days.

The provisions most likely to affect students directly include:

> Making Pell Grants, the

government's main support program for low-income students, available year-round, not just for fall and spring semester. That would enable students to finish coursework more quickly by using summer term.

> Expanding requirements for textbook publishers to share pricing information with professors. Publishers also face the first federal limits on their ability to "bundle" textbooks with supplementary materials, such as CDs, that students may not want or need. Critics say the practice is a big reason textbooks cost so much — about \$900 per student per year, according to a 2005 government study.

> Forcing colleges to report more information about their own costs and prices. The Education Department will publish lists of some that raise tuition sharply.

> Providing more protections and disclosure for students taking out private loans. The bill also begins streamlining the complicated process of applying for federal student aid.

As to be expected with a 1,200-page bill, reaction has been mixed. College groups welcome the changes to Pell Grants, for instance, but not new requirements on data they report to Washington, which they say will cost them — and by extension, students.

The plan for lists of tuition-increase offenders reflects the influence of a 2006 national commission on higher education, which called for more accountability and transparency from colleges on costs. But it probably won't have much effect on the core issues driving price increases. Those include competition among colleges for the best faculty and facilities; families' willingness to pay for big-name schools; and the declining share of public university budgets picked up by the states.

"It will certainly be a list that no college or university president will want to be on," said Terry Hartle, senior vice president of the American Council on Education. "However, if they are on it,

my guess is they will have very good explanations for why — for example, big budget cuts for state appropriations."

Luke Swarthout, of the group U.S. PIRG, which lobbies for a range of student causes, said the textbook provisions are important for solving the problem of rising textbook prices.

Bruce Hildebrand, executive director for higher education for the Association of American Publishers, which represents several big textbook companies, said most publishers already are doing what the bill requires, but his group backed the changes in their final form.

Ultimately, though, both sides agree that new technologies like e-books will play a far bigger role in determining whether prices fall.

Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon of California, the senior Republican on the House Education and Labor Committee, said earlier this week the final agreement "recognizes the remarkable power of sunshine and transparency to

empower consumers" and "holds schools accountable for driving up prices" while recognizing those that improve access.

Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., chairman of the House panel, said in an interview that transparency will help students make better decisions.

He also praised one of the bill's most controversial provisions — the final sticking point this week — which allows states access to a small, new grant program only if they maintain their own spending on higher education. The states fought it strongly, arguing that Washington shouldn't tell them how to spend their money. But Miller said it established an important principle.

"We found it unacceptable that the federal government would continue to make more and more resources available ... and have the states walk away from their responsibilities," he said. "We put money on the top and they take it from the bottom."